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ROMANTICISM VS. THE WORSHIP OF FACT

RECENTLY a noted writer reiterated the ancient but fallacious charge of subjectivism against the romantic attitude. The dispute normally arises in the following way: The romantic endeavors to escape from the world of the actual into that of fancy, or more specifically into the realm of esthetic and speculative imagination. The critic, however, interprets this attitude as an unwillingness to submit to outward fact and accuses the romantic of a desire to withdraw into a world of his own creation.

The indictment rests on a confusion between the actual and the real. The critic begins with a fallacious identification of the real with the actual and then goes on to describe any breaking loose from the latter into the world of imagination as a detachment from the objective and a retreat into the subjective. But it is only a vulgar preference or extreme *naïveté* that could lead one to limit reality to the actual; over and above the actual, there is the field of subsistence, of ideal entities, of forms, of possibilities; and the romantic imagination is not vain dreaming but an extension of the area of knowledge itself beyond perception into the realm of these ideal essences.

It was the distinctive merit of Leibniz to have pointed out with clearness that besides the actual there is also the world of possibilities, inhabited by entities that are *real* though not existent. Leibniz, in commenting upon the common-sense view that "heavy bodies really exist and act, but possibilities or essences anterior to existence or apart from it, are imaginary or fictitious" urges that "neither these essences nor what are called eternal truths regarding these essences are fictitious but that they exist in a certain region (if I may so call it) of ideas, that is to say, in God Himself."¹

Now, the romantic escape from the actual is but a transfer of residence into the realm of possibilities. Indeed, romanticism is to art what pure logic is to thought; both are other-worldly, and differ only in the fact that, whereas the former is seeking beauty, the latter is in quest of intellectual values in the universe of all possible worlds. Hence, far from being subjectivistic, romanticism is a projection of the self into the objective; far from being a flight

¹ Quoted from the *Essay on the Ultimate Origination of Things*.

into the void of the unreal, romanticism is a sharing, along with God, in the contemplation of the vast landscape of all possible worlds.

It is the "realist" himself that must be charged with subjectivism. For, by insisting that attention be confined to the actual, the realist manifests a limitation of interest to himself and to his immediate surroundings. After all, the world of actuality has no intrinsic advantages over the world of possibility; we come to like the former quite unreflectively because we find ourselves in it, as we like our brothers and sisters, or our country. To be transported into the possible is to be taken out of ourselves and our own, and the realist, refusing as he does to leave the borders of his spiritual birthplace, betrays an intellectual provincialism; his mind remains untravelled. But the romantic temperament is adventuresome and free, launching bold expeditions into unexplored regions of possibility, all the while going about, not in the fashion of a Baedeker tourist, but immersing itself in the new regions and investigating them with an open mind, unhampered by the prejudices of the little bit of actuality into which it has been born.

The realist suffers from inertia of mind; he is too indolent to move about. But romanticism is the mind become active and restless, for fancy is like blazing coal in the engine of the soul. Thus, the realist's world is poor and narrow, devoid of the wealth and variety of the romantic scenery. And if the poet's dictum that "he does not England know who only England knows" be true, then, by analogy, the realist knows not even his corner of actuality well, because he has not contemplated it in the light of other possibilities.

The fundamental, though tacit, assumption of the defenders of realism is that actuality possesses worth as such and that romanticism is at a great disadvantage for its neglect of the actual. Anselm, even Leibniz himself, maintained that actuality is a requisite of perfection and the transition from possibility to realization an absolute gain. Now, for one thing, Kant has refuted Anselm by showing that actuality adds nothing to possibility. In fact, there is something essentially accidental about actuality. Abstractly, any causal law is as possible as any other; yet one is realized and the others are not. There is no reason why dead people should not talk, but they don't; there is no reason why the sun should rise; it simply does rise and keeps on rising, inexplicably, every morning. Existence is therefore lacking the dignity bestowed by necessity.

Moreover, do we not all admit that distance lends enchantment—

distance in time, distance from the present, in other words, remoteness from the actual? The past is beautiful because it represents that portion of reality which has gone out of time into eternity. That spatio-temporal reality is at best a poor affair, is evidenced by the fact that reason in the guise of science is engaged in a continued effort to patch things up, to fill up vast gaps by correspondingly vast assumptions, introducing the hypothesis of uniformity to explain away the apparent diversity, sewing up the ragged edges of events with the thread of causal law, trying to compensate for the coarse exterior of the stream of happenings by constructing behind appearances a conceptual world of points and atoms, so much so that virtually the larger part of what common-sense and science call reality is nothing but intellectual construction.

But may not actuality claim a certain "robustness" and "concreteness" denied to the world of pure ideas? Even that is doubtful. The robustness of the actual is of a hectic hue and deceptive like the color on a feverish face or the energy exhibited by one who is intoxicated. For the more penetrating and intense the intellectual vision, the more does the actual fade into a shadow, as Plato came to see, until, in the mystical experience, it dissolves into an illusion. The claims of fact upon our attention are not of intrinsic merit but of dominion; we must take notice of the immediate situation because, if we do not, we suffer. And yet it is into this sea of fleeting, chaotic existence that Bergsonian mysticism invites us to plunge—stripped bare of all clothing of intellectual elaboration—to be drawn below by fickle currents, away from the fresh and free atmosphere of creative thought.

In sum, existence is an evil and creation the original sin. Leibniz himself recognized that a possibility can never be realized as such because the receptivity of the world is limited. To realize is to weaken, to dilute the ideal. That, as J. S. Mill complained, a heretic becomes a tyrant as soon as he enters into power—in other words, that one ceases to care for freedom as soon as one has attained it—is a vivid instance of the vicious effect of attempting to transfer the ideal from the realm of possibility to that of fact. The question instinctively arises, why there should be a world of existence at all. If we look at the process as a passage from the possible to the actual through the mechanism of creation, then the problem before us is indeed insoluble. But the situation is simplified if we take existence as granted and regard the universal process as one of a gradual liberation of the possible from the existent. To this view, the law of the dissipation of energy lends strong support. Obviously, matter obstinately resists extinction, yet the availability

of energy for work constantly diminishes; in other words, *its ability to embody new forms and ideas is gradually being reduced*. Spurts of new life and the formation of new combinations indicate desperate efforts on the part of the actual to extend its hold upon the ideal; but with the eventual cessation of work, foreshadowed by the so-called law of degeneration, the dominion of matter over form will come to an end, and the realm of possibilities will no longer suffer encroachment from the actual.

In line with this tendency are all the noblest aspirations of man as embodied in art, in religion, and in philosophy. In these, the soul proclaims itself an exile in the actual and voices a profound yearning to escape from the immediate in time and in space. Romanticism, then, as we have defined it, is not by any means an isolated movement. Philosophy and poetry constitute preëminent instances of the soul liberating itself from fact under the stimulus, in the one case, of intellectual and in the other of esthetic imagination. Even science, as we noted above, is not a mirror of fact, but an intellectual embroidery upon it. And as philosophy expresses the romanticism of the intellect, so does the attitude of faith represent the romanticism of the will. For what is this undying optimism in the face of failure, this pathetic devotion to hopeless causes, this faith in the eventual doing of justice when injustice rules unchecked, this belief in human beings and confidence in their unlimited progress, but a vast construction of the moral imagination upon the very facts of failure?

In the long run, life can not be left wholly out of account; after all, life is one of the many dreams and the actual world one of the infinite possible worlds. We should therefore school our minds to conceive the actual *sub specie possibilitatis*—to use it indeed as a stepping-stone into the domain of possibility. For the enlightened soul inhabits a world whose area embraces the actual but extends far beyond it into the subsistent, and its home is the entire universe of being.

RAPHAEL DEMOS.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

RELATIVITY, OLD AND NEW¹

IN the presentation of a scientific theory for philosophical consideration, it is of primary importance that the fundamental bases of the theory be brought prominently, and indeed unequivocally

¹ Certain objections to J. E. Turner's article "Some Philosophic Aspects of Scientific Relativity," this JOURNAL, Vol. XVIII, No. 8.